

of research that Cole and others are pioneering.

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Speaker's corner

The misuse of euphemisms in public health: the case of "food insecurity"

We can assume that public health tends to suffer a kind of primordial tension between the individual and collective levels of organisation, which can manifest itself in different ways and demand distinct treatments. The issue is known to affect the risk of fallacies (aggregative or atomistic/ecological) when you attempt to study aspects pertaining to individuals or societies and moves back and forth between these levels of organisation. In this process, the terrible individual experience of hunger is over-attenuated and "transformed" in collective terms into something comparatively harmless, referred to as "food insecurity".

It would be worthwhile to begin here with an argumentative exercise verging on the absurd by clarifying our position, even though risking the possibility of falling into sophistic rhetoric. In this sense, we draw an analogy between hunger and pain. Based on Michel Serres,¹ one of the most striking events in the 20th century was the possibility of greater control over somatic pain through the development of powerful analgesics and anaesthetics widely used in modern medicine. How do you consider, in collective terms, the dimension of individual pain, a non-transferable human experience, proper to yourself?

The expression "analgesic insecurity" would certainly prove unsatisfactory and perhaps even absurd for such a purpose. Clearly, in various aspects, a person's relationship to food is not equivalent to that with anaesthetic and analgesic drugs. Humankind would not survive without food, and we

do not even need expert middlemen to prescribe food. There is no "need", but in today's world there are clearly many nutritional experts who dictate the healthiest ways of eating in individual and collective terms, with a view towards health promotion.

In addition, in both Portuguese and Spanish, we have coexisting in the same expression ("segurança alimentar" or "seguridad alimentaria", respectively) something that fails to lexicalise a specificity in hunger problems. Meanwhile, in English we have "food security" to designate facets related to the precariousness involved in insufficiency or scarcity of food, whether in production, stability of distribution flows, and access. And we also have "food safety" to indicate aspects related to the precariousness involved in sufficiency (or excess) food in terms of quality and harmlessness (lack of contamination by micro-organisms or toxic metals). Even so, there is a certain famished element causing discomfort due to the outrage that is unduly attenuated by treating the hunger of multitudes of human beings as something impersonal under the cold technical designation "food insecurity".

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